DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 256 171 FL 014 997

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TITLE A Model FLEX (Foreign Language Experience) Program for the Elementary School.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Second/Foreign Language Acquisition by Children (Oklahoma City, OK, March 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Educational Research; Elementary Education; *FLES; *Introductory Courses; Program Descriptions; *Program Design; *Second Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Foreign Language Experience Programs; Knoxville City School System TN; *Total Physical Response; University of Tennessee

ABSTRACT

Research has documented that the study of a second language in an elementary school may positively affect the young child's general school achievement and linguistic progress, promote superior performance in high school language study, result in significantly higher mental maturity, make children more language-aware, and improve other cognitive skills. In response to requests from the community for elementary school instruction, the Foreign Language Education Department of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK) developed a foreign language experience (FLEX) program for the kindergarten and first grades at an elementary school in 1982. Five graduate students from the UTK programs taught the three-quarter elementary Spanish course for college credit, using the Total Physical Response method and conducting classes in Spanish as much as possible. Response to the program by parents, teachers, and students has been positive and enthusiastic, and some interest has been expressed in expanding the program and making it an integral part of the elementary school curriculum. (MSE)

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"A Model FLEX (Foreign Language Experience) Program for the Elementary School"

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The study of foreign languages and cultures (should be placed) alongside the five 'basics of English, mathematics, computer science, social studies, and the natural sciences as a fundamental components of a sound education.

Critical Needs in International Education 1

Foreign language instruction in the United States is indeed a critical issue at this writing. "Only 15 percent of all high school students are enrolled in foreign language courses...and only one percent of all students are ever exposed to a foreign language in elementary school systems." (Ranbom, 1983, p. 7) It is noteworthy to compare these statistics to those following the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 2 which precipated a renewed interest in second-language instruction in elementary and secondary schools across the United States. 3 This trend toward second-language study (commonly accepted as a standard component of European curricula) was responsible for the great popularity of foreign language study in the elementary school (first known as FLES in 1953) 4. A search of contemporary literature revealed that FLES was "offered by approximately 95 percent of large public school systems...75 percent of the average systems...and by 50 percent of the small systems." (NEA, 1967, p. 113)

One exemplary elementary foreign language program is presently being conducted in the Knoxville, Tennesse City School System by the University of Tennessee. This article will present a summary of research of the effects of early foreign language study, a brief overview of the Foreign Language Education Program at University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), and a description of the organization, curricular content, methodology and evaluation of Knoxville's unique FLEX (Foreign Language Experience) Program.

EFFECTS OF EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Research has documented that the study of a second languge in an elementary school curriculum may positively affect the young child's "general school achievement and linguistic progress." (Donoghue, 1965; Potts, 1967; Smith, 1967) It can also promote superior progress in high school languge study and may result in a significantly higher gain in mental maturity compared to that realized by non-FLES students during the same period. (Brega, 1967; 1965; Donoghue, 1965; Vocolo, 1967)

Learning a foreign language is elementary school also appears to make children more language-aware. Robert J. DiPietro of the University of Delaware reports that "the study of foreign languages does indeed help children learn to read better in English." (Kindig, 1981, p. 64-65)

Other benefits of second-language study include higher critical thinking ability, better mental discipline, and more refined levels of mental dexterity (Wiley, 1985), flexibility, and creativity. (Jarvis, 1980)

FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION AT UTK

The University of Tennessee at Knoxville is the only foreign language teacher-training institute in Tennessee with an established Foreign Language Education Program offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees specifically in foreign language education. The program serves those undergraduate and post-baccalaureate students seeking Tennessee secondary certification in one or more foreign language areas (including English as a Second Language), and graduate students seeking an Masters of Science degree in foreign language education or a collateral area in either the Ph.D. or Ed.D. degree programs.

The Foreign Language Education Program is unique in that its methods component includes three weeks of supervised middle school foreign language instruction in the public school classroom (in addition to regularly scheduled field experiences and students teaching courses). Graduate students have the opportunity to participate in a model FLEX (Foreign Language Experience for the Elementary School) in designated schools in the Knoxville City School System, teaching French, Spanish and German 30 minutes twice a week during the regular academic year. The FLEX program is described below.

THE PILOT FLEX PROGRAM

In response to requests from the community for elementary school instruction, the Foreign Language Education Program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at UTK, developed a Foreign Language Experience (FLEX) for the kindergarten and first grades at Pleasant Ridge Elementary (Knoxville City Schools System) in the spring of 1982.

Five graduate students from the College of Educatiion Foreign Language Educatin Program and from the Department of Romance Languages were identified and trained by the writer during twice weekly on-site seminars at Pleasant Ridge, immediately following each contact expereience in the classroom.
Thirty-minute Spanish instruction was offered twice a week to all K-1 students; graduate credit was awarded for this unique field

experience.

The Knoxville City Schools System's enthusiasm toward the Pilot FLEX Program was so great that the FLEX Program was expanded to include grades K-5 at Pond Gap Elementary for the 1982-1983 academic year. Due to the variety of language specialities of UTK foreign language education graduate student instructors, French, Spanish and German were offered to the students at Pond Gap. As the director and the supervisor of the FLEX Program, this writer has had the opportunity to observe the linguistic progress of the FLEX participants in and out of the classroom, and finds that most children will spontaneously greet visitors, teachers, and one another in the second language studied and will attempt to engage others in conversation in the target language.

At this writing, the FLEX Program has grown from a five school site operation to eight schools 5 where every third grader receives 30 minutes of language instruction twice weekly. The program is funded out of discretionary monies from Knoxville City School System and through cooperative efforts of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

THE FLEX CURRICULUM

The content of the FLEX curriculum was developed by the director of the program in 1982 and is presented below. (It should be noted that in addition to the content listed in the first year FLEX Program, the FLEX students are given a minimum of five minutes of culture (i.e., customs, geography, art, music, national holidays) of the peoples who speak the foreign language studied.

CURRICULUM
First Quarter

Basic greetings: How are you? What is your name? Where do you live?
Common classroom objects: chair, table/desk, chalk, chalkboard, paper, pencil, book, door, window, etc.
Miscellaneous objects: hat, box, bag, notebooks, etc.
Parts of the body: head, mouth, eye(s), ear(s), hair, hand, foot, leg
Commands: stand up, sit down, touch, go, write, pick up, put/place, give, show
Prepositions: at, toward, in, out, on under, next to, in from of, behind Colors: red, yellow, green, black, white, blue
Numbers: 1-20
Songs: "Are You Sleeping," "One Little, Two Little, Three Little Indians," Christmas songs

Second Quarter

Review of first quarter
Chain of 3 to 5 oral commands; teacher to student; student to teacher

Numbers: 25-100
Prepositional phrases (advanced, using known and new vocabulary)
How to tell time
Weather expressions
Common foods: grouped according to meals
Articles of clothing
Additional body parts (fingers, toes, thumbs, etc.)
The calendar: days of the week

Third Quarter

Review of first and second quarters
The calendar: months of the year
Time expressions with appropriate activities
Weather expressions with clothing and sports vocabulary
Sports: nouns and verbs
Animals

THE FLEX PROGRAM'S METHODOLOGY

Since the primary emphasis is for a meaningful and enjoyable experience with a second languge, the Asher "Total Physical Response Method" (1979) is used extensively in the FLEX Program. Aural-oral linguistic skills are easily taught using this unique technique, which utilizes the audio-motor mode of learning. For example, in one of the first lessons dealing with common classroom objects, the teacher might say, "Je vais a la porte" (I am going to the door). He/she would then go to the door. The instructor would then tell a student in the classroom to "Allez a la porte" (Go to the door). The student would then quickly respond by performing the command requested of him/her. This technique utilizes the right hemisphere of the brain, rather than the traditional left side of the brain where undoubtedly foreign language students translate the foreign language into their own native language before comprehension takes place. In other words, after receiving foreign language stimuli, the FLEX student performs the foreign language cue request, thereby internalizing and coding the message through audio input and motor output. This technique has a built-in novelty element to all foreign language students and has a very high retention span in long-term memory (Asher, 1979).

The FLEX classes are conducted as much as possible in the second language. Manipulatives, visuals, and a rich variety of props are used throughout the 30-minute lessons to stimulate and maintain a high level of enthusiasm and to produce fast-paced, exciting activities for the students. It is not unusual to find the regular classroom teachers reinforcing the second language in the classroom (greetings, counting, songs,) after the FLEX instructors have left.

A very popular activity in the FLEX classroom is what this writer calls "foreign language rhythmics." A portable electric keyboard (i.e. Casio PT-1 model) with built-in rhythm, is used to

produce musical patterns which are emulated by the students using the target language. The following are a few examples of foreign language utterances accompanying different electronically produced rhythms: Beguine: Comment allez-vous?; Rock 1: Buenos Dias!; March: Ca va?; 4-Beat: numbers; Swing: Bonjour; Samba: Donde vive usted? Ou habitez-vous? Yo vivo en la calle...; Rock 2: verb conjugations.

Even though the emphasis is essentially on oral-aural skills in the FLEX classroom, tracing, modified cloze activities, and reproduction of the written foreign language is introduced in the middle of the academic year. In fact, by the end of the school year, students have a notebook, "cahier," "cuaderno," filled with foreign language vocabulary, expressions, and songs. Middle and end-of the-year culminating activities may include: five-minute individual oral reports on a particular foreign country, its people, geography and customs; mini-skits in the target language; and, language days, when parents and guests are invited to savor the customs and traditional foods of the countries studied in the FLEX classroom.

EVALUATION OF THE FLEX PROGRAM

Response to the FLEX Program has been positive and enthusiastic. Data collected from parents, teachers and FLEX students since the program's inception in 1982 echo the desires of all concerned to continue the present program and hopefully expand it to other sites and grade levels. Solicited and unsolicited parental comments include:

"My daughter...is extremely excited about participating in the pilot French program offered...this year...Further monies need to be funded for the continuation of the program."

"I was very pleased with both the teacher and the classroom participation, which I personally observed two days. With the upcoming curriculum change concerning a mandatory two years of a foreign language in high school before acceptance into a college or university, this elementary program should be a big boost for these students. What an easier time learning foreign language they will have because of this fine program!...This, in my opinion, is a definitive step forward--for better schools in Tennessee. Keep up the good work!"

Teacher comments included:

"I was excited before it (the FLEX Program) began and I'm still excited about it; I hope it will continue next year."

"I don't consider this time as "lost" Language Arts time. This is "Language development." The children are having the opportunity for oral expression and creative learning.

Student comments included:

"It's fun knowing two languages. You can talk something that other people don't."

"It was fun and it was easy to learn."

SUMMARY

This writer has guarded optimism for the continuation and hopeful expansion of the FLEX Program in the Knoxville City Schools System to one day include all elementary school sites and no longer be considered just as a "pilot" program, but rather, as an integral component of the elementary school curriculum.

Reference Notes

1 This citation appears in the December 1983 preface of CRITICAL NEEDS IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION, which is a report created by the National Advisory Board on International Education Programs. The 25-member Board was created by President Carter on April 21, 1978. See: President's Commission, 1979.

2 More than $43 million were spent on improving second-language instruction between 1958 and 1965.

3 Foreign language enrollments grew 60.3 percent between 1960 and 1965; 10 percent between 1965 and 1968. (See: Chastain, 1980)

4 Kenneth Mildenberger, assistant director of the foreign language program of the Modern Languge Association of America (in 1962), invented the term FLES when speaking of foreign language instruction on the elementary level. (See: Language Structure at FLES Level: A Report by the FLES Committee of the American Association of Teachers of French, December 29, 1962).

5 The 1985 FLEX elementary schools are: Bearden; Chilhowee; Fountain City; Pond Gap; Ridgedale; Rocky Hill; Sequoyah; West Hills; all schools are located in Knoxville City Schools, Knoxville, Tennessee.

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